



ISSN: 0975-833X

Available online at <http://www.journalcra.com>

International Journal of Current Research
Vol. 10, Issue, 10, pp.74654-74658, October, 2018

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.24941/ijcr.32623.10.2018>

**INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL
OF CURRENT RESEARCH**

RESEARCH ARTICLE

GENDER DIFFERENCES IN DROPPING OUT OF THE FITNESS-SPORT

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ARTICLE INFO

Article History:

Received 16th July, 2018
Received in revised form
07th August, 2018
Accepted 29th September, 2018
Published online 31st October, 2018

Key Words:

Dropping out,
Gender-specific,
Members,
Fitness-sport.

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Citation: Georgios F. Zarotis, 2018. "Gender Differences in dropping out of the Fitness-Sport", *International Journal of Current Research*, 10, (10), 74654-74658

ABSTRACT

In the evaluations and statistical analyses presented here we examine which reasons for quitting activity in a gym prevail in men and women, and how far the genders differ in these reasons. The collected data should help to derive recommendations for action in order to increase the customer satisfaction in fitness companies and to reduce the long-term drop-out rates by an adequate service offering. In the survey a total of 225 people, who had quitted their membership in the past, were questioned in a telephone inquiry. The study was conducted in a health-oriented fitness centre in a major city in Germany. At the time of the study the fitness facility had up to 1.151 memberships. Among them, 59% of the members were women and 41% were men. The average age of the respondents was 43.5 years. The average duration of membership added up to 4.4 years. Overall, it is found that only a few of the quitting reasons offered in the survey are also indicated in significant frequency as important for the quitting decision. With the exception of membership costs, these reasons have nothing to do with studio conditions, but rather, apart from the mentioned health problems, mainly address issues of time scheduling and prioritizing the training in relation to other areas of life. The differences between the genders are, in most cases, very small, although 9 of the 18 verifiable differences can be secured against chance. Really clear gender differences are found mainly in three quitting reasons: Professional obligations are much more pronounced in men as a quitting reason. Domestic and family obligations, on the other hand, and regular training timetable not compatible with my schedule are clearly stronger quitting reasons among women.

INTRODUCTION

The fitness line is characterized both by an almost stagnating number of fitness clubs and an annual fluctuation of total membership numbers within the fitness studios. As a result, many fitness clubs are constantly struggling with high customer fluctuation. High drop-out rates also have the effect that long-term financial as well as staff-wise arrangements are barely possible to make. Against this backdrop the question then arises: How is it that dropouts occur in fitness clubs at all? In order to answer this question, we have to identify the different needs of the customers. In the evaluations and statistical analyses presented here, the focus is on how strong the various reasons are for quitting activities in a fitness studio. It is also studied to what extent these reasons differ from one another in terms of importance for the drop-out decision. We also examine whether there are typical priorities in the drop-out justification and which reasons are used, in a statistically significant way, more or less or not at all. The collected data should help to derive recommendations for action in order to increase the customer satisfaction in fitness companies and to reduce the long-term drop-out rates by an adequate service offering (Zarotis 1999, Rampf 1999 and Zarotis *et al.*, 2017). In the evaluations and statistical analyses presented here the focus

lies on the question which reasons for quitting activity in a gym prevail in men and women, and how far the genders differ in these reasons. Brehm and Eberhardt (1995) questioned fitness studio members about their reasons for quitting training because they had not renewed their contract. The major reason for quitting the activity was the "lack of fun in the sporting activities". Also important for the quitting decision were "motivation problems" (e.g., laziness), "lack of time" (often due to heavy workload) and "financial reasons" (too expensive membership fees). In response to an open question about the specific quitting reasons, the members criticised the "studio atmosphere" (too impersonal) as well as the "lack of social support" (e.g. no contact with other members, partner has quit the training, etc.) and also the "high membership costs" (e.g. for additional services like childcare) were viewed critically. This shows that quitting a sports program always depends on personal as well as situational characteristics (Rampf 1999). Although it is possible to identify specific reasons which finally lead to dropping out, the participation behaviour is affected by a complex factor structure. Dishman (1982, 1998) several times remarks critically on the often-unsystematic approach of many studies and describes them as a-theoretical. This lack of standardization of theories and examination methods restricts the comparability of the studies considerably. Especially the limited data base and the lack of uniform models complicate the research.

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MATERIAL AND METHODS

Survey methodology: A total of 225 people, who had terminated their contract in the past, were questioned by a telephone inquiry about their decision. The advantages of the telephone survey are the low cost per interview, the possibility of responding to queries and the high external validity (Homburg/Krohmer, 2008). The study was conducted in a health-oriented fitness centre in a major city in Germany in July 2016. At the time of the study, the gym had up to 1.151 memberships. Among them 59% of the members were women and 41% were men. The average age of the respondents was 43.5 years. The average duration of membership added up to 4.4 years. The respondents were persons who have terminated their contract in the period between July 2015 and July 2016. In this period 305 members departed, of those 225 persons were found and questioned. 54 people could not be found, probably due to a relocation or change of the telephone number. 26 persons did not wish to participate in the survey (Zarotis/Tokarski, 2005, Zarotis *et al.*, 2017). The persons were asked about the importance of different reasons for their decision to leave the gym. They were asked to rank the importance of each of these 19 reasons for leaving in a five-point Likert scale. The scaling ranged from "does not apply at all" (coded with the numerical value 1) and "applies strongly" (coded with the numerical value 5). The three intermediate stages were not verbally expressed in the questionnaire; only the polarity of the scale was verbalized over the two extreme points. Thus, the total of 19 individual subjects were considered as scale marks regarding the significance of individual quitting reasons even in the strict meaning of the metric theory, which in statistical evaluation makes the calculation of mean values and the use of parametric statistical methods possible.

In most of the questionnaire items there were no response refusals, so that in 14 of the 19 questionnaires there are valid values even $N = 225$. In three items there was a missing value, i.e. a person refused to respond, in one item there were 2 missing values and in another item 3 missing value. The age of the interviewees was recorded in whole years; here, in one case, there was a missing value, so that in $N = 224$ cases; the information about the age is in years. In the data analysis, the sample characteristics are initially described in terms of gender distribution, age and duration of membership in the studio. Subsequently, the mean values of the 19 aspects of the studio evaluation are presented descriptively with respect to the two gender groups. To ensure the inferential statistic of the differences between the genders, T-tests are used for independent samples. The model assumptions of the variance homogeneity are tested by Levine tests, and in the case of significant variance differences, the T-test is calculated with corrected degrees of freedom and T-values (Welch-Test). The conventional significance level of $p < .05$ is applied. When values are lower from the significance threshold, it can be assumed that the gender differences can be generalized beyond the sample to the population and are not mere random effects of this specific sampling.

RESULTS

Sample description: The sample consists of $N=164$ female respondents and of $N=61$ male respondents. The age range is between 16 and 74 years – 16 and 74 years for women, as well

as between 20 and 74 years for men - with a respondents' mean age of 43.5 years (43.5 women; 42.0 men) and a distribution of 13.0 years (11.4 women; 16.7 men).

Table 1. Sample distribution characteristic values

		Gender		
		Female	Male	Total
Age	Mean value	43,3	44,1	43,5
	Median	43,5	42,0	43,0
	SD	11,4	16,7	13,0
	Quantity	164	60	224
Membership duration (years)	Mean value	4,1	5,4	4,4
	Median	3,0	5,0	3,0
	SD	3,7	4,1	3,8
	Quantity	164	61	225

Descriptive statistics: Table 2 shows the mean values, median and standard deviation of the 19 questions about the quitting reasons, both differentiated by gender as well as overall in the sample. In Figure 1, the mean values and distributions of the quitting reasons, differentiated according to gender, are depicted as grouped bar graphs.

Significance test of the correlations between quitting reasons and gender: Table 3 shows the results of the significance tests of the differences in mean values between the genders. The difference of the mean values between the genders, the significance and the T-values, as well as the degrees of freedom (df) are reported, thus the test quantities. In the item "too little support by friends/family", no T-Test can be calculated since this item was answered by all interviewees with the response alternative "does not apply at all". Thus, a constant value exists for the sample and constants cannot be checked for significance.

DISCUSSION

Most of the quitting reasons have a mean value of 1 or close to 1, which means that the majority of respondents have chosen the answer "does not apply at all". In one case, where the item "too little support from friends/family" was chosen, the respondents have chosen uniformly the first response category; there is no variance in the answers. The highest rating is clearly found at the quitting reason "Problems with daily schedule"; also, here the distribution is obviously the largest. This question therefore shows the greatest heterogeneity in the respondent group. The study of Brehm and Eberhardt (1995) shows similar results. It is striking that the respondent persons among 30 to 50 years stated "big time problems" as an obstacle to continue their participation in a sports program. This age group was highly stressed for professional and familial reasons. In five other items, mean values are around 2 (mean values between 1.8 and 2.2). These are in descending order the reasons: "professional obligations", "regular training timetable not compatible with my schedule", "domestic/ family obligations", "membership costs too high", and "personal health does not allow further training". The quitting reasons that were chosen by the respondents to be of considerable importance mainly refer to personal time management and thus relate to the prioritization of other sectors of life and other obligations. It is striking that, with the exception of the membership costs, all studio conditions do not play any role, or at least a significant role, in the quitting decision. In the research made by Rampf (1999) it becomes also evident that 19% of the respondent group stated

Table 2. Mean values, median and distribution of the quitting reasons

	Gender											
	Female				Male				Total			
	Mean value	Median	SD	Quantity	Mean value	Median	SD	Quantity	Mean value	Median	SD	Quantity
No fun anymore	1,4	1,0	,1	163	1,0	1,0	,1	61	1,3	1,0	,9	224
Too boring	1,3	1,0	,9	164	1,0	1,0	,0	61	1,2	1,0	,7	225
Others interest	1,4	1,0	1,0	162	1,0	1,0	,0	61	1,3	1,0	,9	223
Offered too little health wise	1,0	1,0	,2	162	1,2	1,0	,6	60	1,1	1,0	,4	222
Problems with daily schedule	2,8	3,0	1,9	164	3,0	4,0	1,6	61	2,9	3,0	1,8	225
Dissatisfied with customer composition in the studio	1,1	1,0	,5	163	1,0	1,0	,0	61	1,1	1,0	,4	224
Dissatisfied with instructor's supervision	1,1	1,0	,4	164	1,0	1,0	,0	61	1,1	1,0	,4	224
Crowded training space	1,4	1,0	,9	164	1,3	1,0	,6	61	1,4	1,0	,9	225
Lack of training progress	1,0	1,0	,1	164	1,0	1,0	,0	61	1,0	1,0	,1	225
Difficult access to the studio	1,2	1,0	,7	164	1,1	1,0	,6	61	1,2	1,0	,7	225
Dislike studio atmosphere	1,2	1,0	,6	164	1,2	1,0	,8	61	1,2	1,0	,7	225
Personal health does not allow further training	1,8	1,0	1,6	164	1,7	1,0	1,4	61	1,8	1,0	1,5	225
Too lazy to continue the training	1,3	1,0	1,0	164	1,0	1,0	,0	61	1,2	1,0	,9	225
Professional obligations	1,7	1,0	1,4	164	3,5	4,0	1,6	61	2,2	1,0	1,7	225
Domestic / family obligations	2,2	1,0	1,7	164	1,4	1,0	,9	61	2,0	1,0	1,6	225
Membership costs too high	2,0	1,0	1,3	164	2,1	2,0	1,0	61	2,0	2,0	1,2	225
Relocation	1,2	1,0	,8	164	1,3	1,0	1,0	61	1,2	1,0	,8	225
Too little support from friends/family	1,0	1,0	,0	164	1,0	1,0	,0	61	1,0	1,0	,0	225
Regular training timetable not compatible with my schedule	2,5	1,0	1,9	164	1,7	1,0	1,2	61	2,2	1,0	1,7	225

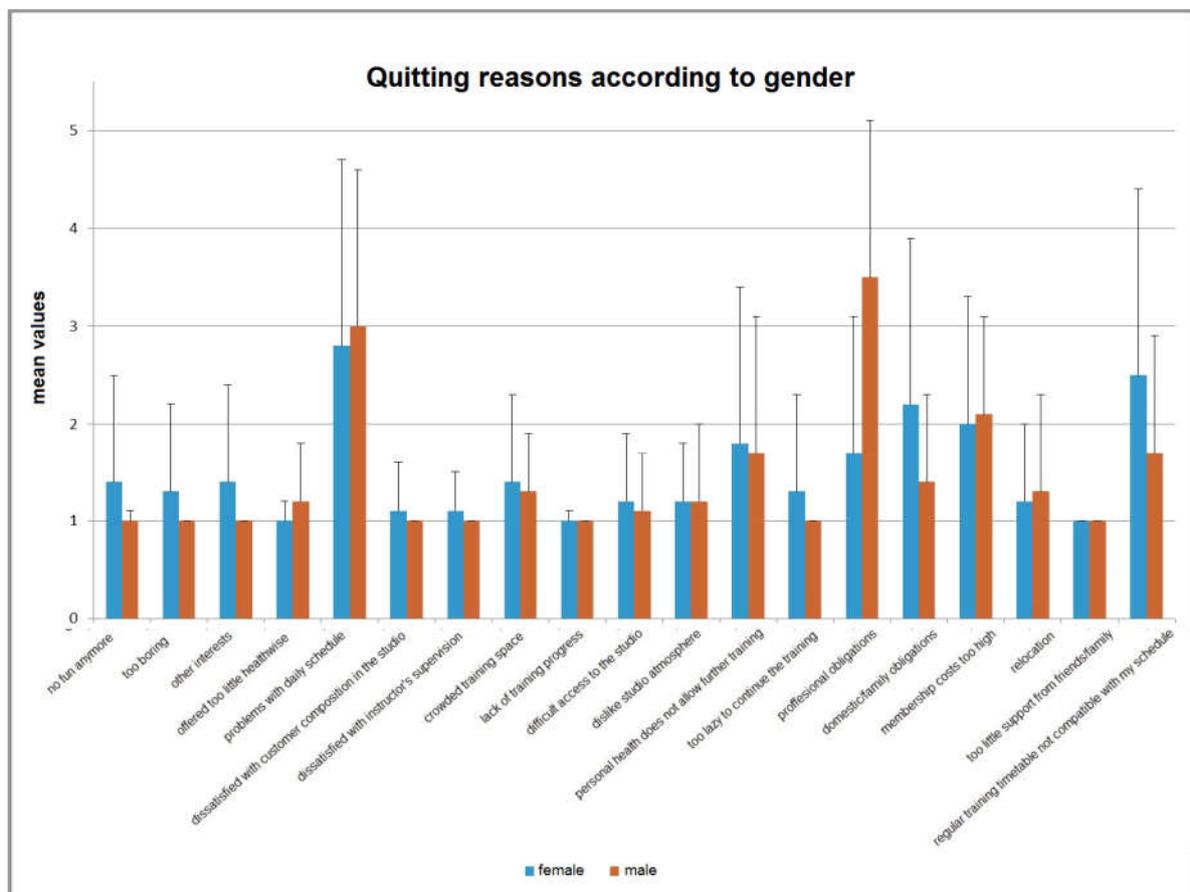


Figure1. Quitting reasons according to gender

“too high cost for membership” as the main single reason for quitting the sports program. However, the real amount of cost is not the actual problem but rather the negative cost/benefit balance (Brehm/Eberhardt 1995). There is also evidence in other studies that financial aspects of dropout play an important role. In the survey by Breuer *et al.* (2013) even 45.1% of the 149 respondents cite as a reason "membership costs", which is why they discontinue fitness training. Financial aspects are also mentioned in a study by the IHRSA (2012) as main arguments for the termination of membership in a fitness club. 52.2% of the 1,000 respondents surveyed said they were no longer able to afford their membership or rated them as expensive. Therefore, in future work, the collection of the income should be considered in order to assess its impact on the dropout.

Of equal small importance are also personal reasons concerning motives and interests. As regards to health, it is striking that, although on the one hand the reason "personal health does not allow further training" appears relatively strong, on the other hand however the reason "offered too little health wise" is practically not indicated. Regarding the differences in gender, there are in many of the quitting reasons only small mean value differences of approximately 0.1-0.2 scale intervals or even less. This is the case in 11 of the 18 items. The most obvious in the sample is the difference concerning the professional obligations (greater acceptance of almost 2 scale intervals among men) and in the case of domestic or family obligations, as well as the item “training timetable not compatible with my schedule”.

Table 3. Mean value differences, significance and test quantities of the T-Tests

Independent samples T-Test			
	t	df	Sig. Mean value difference
No fun anymore	4,552	173,959	,000 ¹ ,389
Too boring	4,084	163,000	,000 ² ,274
Other interests	4,343	161,000	,000 ² ,358
Offered too little Healthwise	1,866	63,460	,067 ² -,146
Problems with my daily schedule	-,559	122,272	,577 ² -,142
Dissatisfied with customer composition in the studio	2,769	162,000	,006 ² ,110
Dissatisfied with instructor's supervision	3,171	163,000	,002 ² ,110
Crowded training space	,745	223	,457,095
Lack of training progress	1,743	163,000	,083 ² ,018
Difficult access to the studio	,639	223	,523,068
Dislike studio atmosphere	-,528	223	,598-,053
Personal health does not allow further training	,286	223	,775,065
Too lazy to continue the training	4,174	163,000	,000 ² ,335
Professional obligations	7,348	97,434	,000 ² -
			1,721
Domestic / family obligations	4,420	202,247	,000 ² ,779
Membership costs too high	-,482	135,142	,631 ² -,078
Relocation	-,828	223	,409-,104
Regular training timetable not compatible with my schedule	3,463	160,676	,001 ² ,746

In these both cases women present greater acceptance, on average about 3/4 of scale intervals. There are also significant differences (between about 1/4 up to 1/3 of scale intervals as difference) in the entries "no fun anymore", "too boring", "other interests" and "too lazy to continue the training". In all the above-mentioned characteristics, women have the higher mean values. In all other entries, the differences are purely descriptive, and thus they are of little significance.

In seven of the 18 items, the gender differences are on the 0.1% level secured against chance ($p \leq 0.001$):

- "professional obligations" – is reported by men as true on average 1.721 more
- "domestic / family obligations" – is reported by women as true on average 0.779 more
- "regular training timetable not compatible with my schedule" – is reported by women as true on average 0.746 more
- "no fun anymore" – is reported by women as true on average 0.389 more
- "other interests" - is reported by women as true on average 0.358 more
- "too lazy to continue the training" - is reported by women as true on average 0.335 more
- "too boring" - is reported by women as true on average 0.274 more

In two further cases, the gender differences are at the 1% level secured against chance:

- "dissatisfied with customer composition in the studio" - is reported by women as true on average 0.110 more
- "dissatisfied with instructor's supervision" - is reported by women as true on average 0.110 more

The two-last mentioned mean value differences are indeed secured against chance at the 5% level and are therefore statistically significant. In terms of content, however, the difference with only 1/10 of scale intervals as mean value difference appears only of minor importance. The fact that

relatively small mean-value differences are still statistically significant (that is, no pure random effect), is due to the sample size, which still allows relatively small differences to be secured against chance. From the point of view of content, however, differences between the genders are not very significant. Thus, the overall conclusion of the collected data is that only the supposed too high fees play an important role for quitting the membership. As a recommendation for action this suggests a more flexible and differentiated price policy on the part of the fitness company. This is the only way to respond to the individual needs of the members and thereby to achieve a better cost/benefit balance for them. A company might consider for example a price concept that includes a variety of class passes or memberships, such as Power Plate classes or cardio classes or an EMS (Electro-Myo-Stimulation) membership. Also, interesting could be a weekend membership or a morning pass from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. with reduced fees or a sauna pass only. For persons who would like to exercise only sporadically or people who are often away on business or those who exercise elsewhere a 10-days pass or a day pass would be appropriate. The aim of all these measures is to maintain member loyalty and to customize the membership to changed life circumstances (Zarotis *et al.*, 2017).

Conclusions

Overall, it is found that only a few of the quitting reasons offered in the survey are also indicated in significant frequency as important for the quitting decision. With the exception of membership costs, these reasons have nothing to do with studio conditions, but rather, apart from the mentioned health problems, mainly address issues of time scheduling and prioritizing the training in relation to other areas of life. The differences between the genders are, in most cases, very small, although 9 of the 18 verifiable differences can be secured against chance. Really clear gender differences are found mainly in three quitting reasons: Professional obligations are much more pronounced in men as a quitting reason. Domestic and family obligations, on the other hand, and regular training timetable not compatible with my schedule are clearly stronger quitting reasons among women. Only the supposed excessive costs play a role for quitting the membership. As a recommendation for action this again suggests a more flexible and differentiated price policy on the part of the fitness companies. The overall conclusion is that there are still too few studies on the drop-out problem available globally as far as the fitness area is concerned. There is reason to believe that the companies reluctantly release such sensitive data for scientific purposes or that they don't collect the data in the first place. However, this would be an essential instrument in order to decrease the termination ratio and to improve the success of the fitness companies in the long run.

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